

**Innovation Academy on Marketing Communication:
hands-on seminars for SMEs**

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Track: Entrepreneurial and Small Business Marketing

Abstract

The development of non-technical innovation by SMEs is a spearhead for smart economic development in many European Regions. In order to stimulate business model innovation within SMEs in its economic region, the Flemish government in Belgium decided to organize Innovation Academies. The government invited knowledge institutions to propose, organize and run collaborative education modules for SMEs. University Colleges Leuven-Limburg decided to take this opportunity to make an impact on the innovative capacity of regional SMEs by translating the results of research and educational projects into hands-on sessions for SME business leaders. In our paper we will exemplify how University Colleges Leuven-Limburg designed these sessions with practical guidelines and tools. The sessions were highly rated by the participants as the content was adapted to the specific context of SMEs where innovation may be stifled by limited financial and marketing resources.

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1. Problem statement

Many SMEs focus on the (optimization of the) production processes and product innovation to grow their business. This is especially the case for SMEs which started out as rather technical enterprises. However, developing a corresponding business and marketing strategy is equally important for the commercial success of their new products or services. Still, many business leaders in SMEs are confronted with a knowledge gap in business management and marketing communication and lack the financial and human resources to close this gap.

Nowadays a wide range of initiatives is available in Flanders to support innovation in enterprises. However, recent studies into the support landscape for Science, Technology & Innovation in the region conclude that, while enterprises in Flanders can benefit from a wide range of innovation support initiatives, these instruments are a) mainly oriented toward technological innovation, and b) targeted toward big(ger) companies rather than SMEs (EWI, 2013; SERV - Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid, 2014). In other words, the bulk of innovation support instruments available to Flemish enterprises contributes little to bridging the aforementioned knowledge gap on non-technological innovation, business model innovation, business management and marketing communication in SMEs.

2. Method

In order to accommodate this blind spot for SMEs in its economic region, the Flemish government in Belgium decided to organize Innovation Academies. The government invited knowledge institutions to propose, organize and run these academies as a series of collaborative education modules offered to SMEs. Each academy had to address a central topic and is decomposed over a number of hands-on sessions tailored on the specific needs of SMEs. In order to favor the interaction between the participants and the specialists, the number of participants is limited to 18. Moreover, participants can discuss the challenges they face during those seminars. In 2014, University Colleges Leuven-Limburg decided to embrace this opportunity to make an impact on the innovative capacity of regional SMEs by translating the results of research and educational projects into hands-on sessions for SME business leaders. University Colleges Leuven-Limburg designed special sessions with practical guidelines and tools. The impact and the content was adapted to the specific context of SMEs where innovation is governed by limited financial and marketing resources.

3. Approach

University Colleges Leuven-Limburg organized an Innovation Academy on Innovative Marketing Communication (spring 2014). The following topics were addressed:

- Innovative Trends in Marketing Communication
- Social Media as an Innovative Marketing Communication Strategy
- Legal Rules for E-marketing Communication
- Construal of Regional Innovative Partnerships
- Discovery of New International Markets
- Creative Thinking and Business Modeling

These sessions were conceived as a valorization of research conducted by the research units Marketing Communication and Law & Practice at University Colleges Leuven-Limburg. For topics beyond their specialism, the researchers were supported by external consultants. The topics of the sessions were selected based on the knowledge gap encountered within 20 SME cases of the International Innovation Labs (Van Goolen, Evers & Lammens, 2014). An analysis of these cases showed that SMEs struggled with specific building blocks of the Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder, & Pigneur, 2010). SMEs mainly need extra theoretical and hands-on support on customer segments, value propositions, channels and customer relationships.

Each session of the aforementioned Innovation Academy consisted of two parts: first, the theoretical background was sketched, supported and illustrated by examples taken from past business cases solved for SMEs; next, an interactive hands-on session was organized where the participants could apply the models presented in the first part to their own business problem, coached by the specialist(s) leading the session.

The general part of the session is based on the expertise gathered during previous research projects. That expertise was explicitly tailored to the specific needs and resources of SMEs and presented in a practical format to enhance its usability in the hands-on part. In this last part of each session, the participants were offered ample opportunities to present their problem, to discuss it in the group coached by the external consultants and/or specialists of the University Colleges Leuven-Limburg.

4. Discussion and conclusion

As for the impact, 18 entrepreneurs from the wider Leuven region attended the first Innovation Academy, the maximum number that was allowed to participate from the Flemish government. After each session, the participants were invited to fill out an evaluation sheet.

Table 1: evaluation of the Innovation Academy on Marketing Communication

	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6
General evaluation	4.56	4.53	3.83	4.36	3.60	4.50
Business-related topic	3.91	3.93	3.64	4.31	3.50	4.08
Networking possibilities	4.09	3.73	4.00	4.15	3.92	4.17
Content	4.42	4.69	4.09	4.08	3.58	4.42

On a scale from 1 (weak) to 5 (very good) each session was granted a score between 3.60 and 4.56. Furthermore, the scores indicate that the content as well as the format was positively assessed by the participants. Moreover, the answers clearly prove that the initiative of the Innovation Academy as well as the topic of Innovation Marketing Communication addresses a real need amongst entrepreneurs and SME business leaders. As a consequence, the Flemish government has approved the organization of one extra Innovation academy by University Colleges Leuven-Limburg and one extra Innovation Academy by University Colleges Leuven-Limburg in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce.

A final outcome of the Innovation Academy is that several participants asked for actual support to innovate their business model and marketing communication. Those questions were forwarded to the SME-Routes (Van Hoorick, & Lamberts, 2014) and the International Innovation Labs (Van Goolen, Evers, & Lammens, 2014), which are two service offerings for entrepreneurs where researchers and students of University Colleges Leuven-Limburg address genuine business cases of SMEs and present viable solutions tailored to the resources and needs of those companies.

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